

Entrapment or Empowerment: ESL Profiles

Lee Su Kim

Abstract

This paper will discuss some of the findings of a doctoral research study on how the acquisition of the English language impacted the cultural identities of a group of Malaysian ESL speakers. The participants shared that learning English was an empowering and positive experience. English possessed a quality of directness and neutrality which allowed expression of their innermost feelings. In multicultural societies, where certain values are attached to the use of the vernacular languages, resorting to English provided a freedom of expression because of it is "free of any ethnicity" within localized contexts. The findings also revealed that participants experienced identity conflicts and that the sociocultural context in which English is acquired, particularly in postcolonial societies, is loaded with complex cultural and political issues.

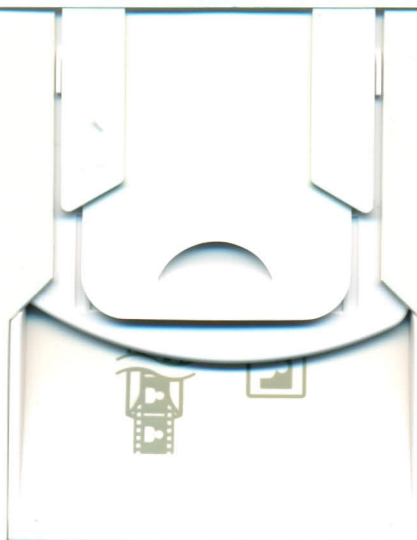
Background

Conceptualizing the language learner as a complex social being is a recent development in second language acquisition (SLA). Research studies in the 70s tended to focus on the learner and the learning processes and strategies involved in the acquisition of a second language. Methods such as stimulated recall, think-aloud protocols, retrospective reflections and observation techniques were employed in an attempt to understand these processes. The findings and insights arising from the body of learner-centered research have contributed to a better understanding of the 'how?' of language learning, but ignore the social context in which language learning takes place.

Recent research in the 90s have revealed that language learners are social beings and that learning a language or adapting to a new culture is a process of socialization. No matter what processes are employed, if the socio-cultural context is not amenable to language learning, if the learners possess low self-esteem or identity conflicts, effective learning may not take place. McKay and Wong (1996) state that we cannot afford to ignore the social context of language learning: "This question - so crucial to the eventual development of successful pedagogy - cannot begin to be answered without paying scrupulous attention to the social context of language learning, and without radically redefining the second-language-learner" (1996, p. 578)

Peirce's (1995) research study on immigrant women living in Canada has been significant in contributing towards a better understanding of social identity. Peirce draws on the poststructuralist conception of social identity as a multi-layered construct, subject to change and negotiation and a site of struggle. She argues that the traditional concepts of motivation dominant in the field of SLA do not take into account the complex relationships of power, identity and language learning. According to Peirce, the concept of *investment*, rather than motivation, more accurately signals the socially and historically constructed relationship of the participants in her study and the ambivalent attitude they have towards learning the target language. If learners invest time and effort in learning a second language, it is with the expectation of being rewarded with a "wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital" (Peirce, 1995, p.17). Thus investment in learning the target language meant investing in one's social identity.

McKay and Wong's (1996) study of four adolescent Chinese immigrants in California found that the language learner is not a "generic, ahistorical 'stick figure'" (1996, p. 603) stereotyped in much ESL literature, but a complex social being with conflicting needs and desires. They exist in complex social environments with unequal power relations, subjected to



multiple discourses. The language learner is both positioned by relations of powers, and resistant to that positioning. He may even set up a counterdiscourse that puts him in a more powerful rather than marginalized position, and is constantly engaged in subtle social negotiations in order to obtain viable identities.

Most of the research studies conducted to investigate the influence of the sociocultural environment on language learners (McKay & Wong, 1996; Morgan, 1997; Norton, 1997; Peirce, 1995) have been carried out in Anglo native-speaker settings where English is the predominant language and the research participants are members of language minority groups. There is a lack of research on ESL learners outside of the traditional English language native-speaker setting.

This paper will present some of the findings of a research study which set out to investigate how language impacts the identities of non-native ESL speakers in Malaysia. In a world where English has become a dominant force and the international lingua franca, does the acquisition of the English language impact the identities of non-native speakers of English? How do they construct their social and cultural identities in relation to English and to the other languages in their repertoire? The fact that English is not the native language of the peoples of Malaysia but a "legacy" of the former colonial masters gives this study a different perspective from recent research (Peirce, 1995; McKay and Wong, 1996) on identity construction. It is hoped that this paper will provide a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in English language acquisition particularly in complex multicultural societies such as Malaysia.

Definition of Identity

What is identity? Identity is a concept that invokes and relates theories from various disciplines such as psychology, anthropology, social psychology, and from interdisciplinary fields such as cultural studies (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner & Cain, 1998). Holland, et al., state that identities, "are a key means through which people care about and care for what is going on around them. They are important bases from which people create new activities, new worlds, and new ways of being" (1998, p.5).

Identity is not easy to define - it is best seen as a plurality and not a unitary construct. Identity formation is not simply a conscious process but is influenced by unconscious psychological processes (DeVos, 1992). Identity is an evolving, dynamic, complex and ongoing process. Norton (1997) defines identity as, "how people understand their relationship to the outside world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future" (p. 410). How one perceives oneself, and the identity that one has of oneself is not entirely within one's control but is highly contingent on the context. Language learners as selves and persons and like other participants in other contexts, occupy worlds where these constructs (of self and of person) are frequently at odds with one another. Duff and Uchida (1997) state that in educational practice, identities and beliefs are constantly being co-constructed, negotiated and transformed on an ongoing basis by means of language.

The Context

Malaysia became an independent sovereign nation, free from the shackles of British colonialism in 1957. Today it has a population of 20 million, comprising three major races: the Malays (51.2%), the Chinese (26.8 %) and the Indians (7.7 %). The indigenous peoples of West Malaysia and East Malaysia (Sarawak and Sabah) comprise another 10.9%. Finally, other minor ethnic groups such as the Eurasians and Portuguese make up 3 % of the population (Malaysia 2000 Yearbook).

Under British rule, English was the language of administration and the medium of instruction in schools established by the British. After independence, Malay was established as the national language and English the official second language of the country. The year 1970 marked the beginning of the transition from English to Malay as the medium of instruction. English became a compulsory second language in the school curriculum. Recently, a major shift in national language policy took place, and English was pronounced the mandatory medium of instruction for two subjects, Science and Mathematics, in the national type schools. This would take place in stages with the initial transition taking place at Standard One, Form One and Lower Six levels in January of 2003. While Malay is the predominant language used in the civil service, English is widely used in the urban cities, in trade and commerce, in the private sector and in the popular media.

The Research Study

The research sample in this study comprised a selected group of Malaysians who were very proficient in the English language but who were not native speakers of the language. They were drawn from a population of students enrolled in a Masters programme in a local university in Malaysia.

Fourteen Malaysian women were interviewed in in-depth qualitative interviews. Seven were Malays, three Chinese, two Indians and the remaining two were an Iban from Sarawak and a Kadazan from Sabah. Four of the older participants were from the English medium and the rest the Malay medium. Two participants had studied abroad in English language schools during their primary school years. The Malay participants were fluent in their native language, Malay, as well as one to a few Malay dialects. The three Chinese participants could speak one or two Chinese dialects but were not proficient in Mandarin. The two Indian participants were both Tamil Indians. One was fluent in three languages -Malay, English and Tamil, while the other was fluent in English and Malay, but could not speak Tamil. The Iban participant was fluent in her native tongue Iban, English and Malay, while the Kadazan student could not speak her mother tongue, being proficient only in Malay and English.

The Research Instruments

The research tools comprised qualitative interviews, questionnaires and personal narratives. The qualitative interviews were semi-structured, and based on Carspecken's critical ethnography interviewing techniques (Carspecken, 1996).

Interview Protocols had to be designed beforehand which would allow maximum flexibility during the interview process. Six topic domains were introduced with one lead-off question for each topic domain. For each lead-off question, a set of possible follow-up questions were formulated. Participants were interviewed individually in two to three hour sessions. All the interviews were audiotaped and the data transcribed using a transcription recorder.

The questionnaire elicited information on the participants' personal background, language background, cultural experiences, and their views and perceptions towards English and the other languages they own. Lastly the participants were requested to write a personal narrative on their perceptions on how their language(s) and culture have influenced them. A content analysis of the narratives provided more information to supplement the subjects' responses from the interviews and questionnaires.

The data was derived from three sources: the interviews, the questionnaires and the narratives. The data was analyzed firstly on an individual basis. The data from the three sources was compiled into one file for each individual subject and the data synthesized to develop a profile for each individual. This enabled cross references to be made across historical time and space for each subject, and was invaluable in giving the researcher a comprehensive picture of each person and insights into each individual's experiences as women coping with their identities in a complex multicultural society. Coding was carried out for each individual subject, and themes were drawn based on the codes. A case study was then written on each subject. The next stage was to scrutinize the data across the subjects, looking for commonalities from which to derive codes. Coding was then carried out based on the codes of each subject. What emerged were dominant themes that cut across all the case studies.

The Findings

Theme 1- Neutrality and Directness of English

This paper will discuss some of the themes that emerged from an analysis of the data. One theme was that all except one of the Malay participants, as well as the Iban participant reported that English possessed a quality of directness and neutrality which allowed them to express their innermost feelings. Several participants reported a preference for the English language when expressing emotions such as love, anger and their innermost feelings. All languages are culture-bound to an extent, and reflect and carry with them the values and moral stances of the cultures. In many Asian cultures, some feelings are seldom expressed and therefore the languages do not lend themselves to the expression of these feelings. The subjects reported that knowing English allows them to express these feelings in English and frees them from the "culture load" than if they were to express themselves in their native language.

This is evident in the expression of love particularly amongst the Malay participants. Fazira states she does not feel comfortable expressing love in Malay. In Malay culture, love is expressed in deeds and not in words. It is seldom verbalized. When it is verbalized, it sounds extremely flowery. Fazira states that she prefers to express love in English:

Fazira: I think it's the language to fall in love, for romantic purposes (laughs). Ya because it's so easy to express your heart through English (laughs). It's weird really.

R (Researcher) : Malay is also a very romantic language.

Fazira: Malay language? Yikes, it's so, it's so Yikes!

Hence when expressing love, for example to her boyfriend, Fazira states that she switches to English. Being bicultural and bilingual, she feels that it is not appropriate to express love in Malay, and thus code switches to English.

Shareen talks about the expression of love in Malay culture and how she finds it easier to express herself in English when expressing love:

Shareen: But when I express my emotions, it's easier in English. Because I think in English too. My thoughts are in English. I don't know whether I should say I am most fluent in English. I don't know but it's easier to speak English than to speak in Malay..

R (Researcher): What about expressions of love?

Shareen: It has to be English.

R: Why?

Shareen: It's so cumbersome to say in Malay. Malays don't express their love, do they?

R: Saya cinta pada mu (Malay for 'I love you')

Shareen: Oh my ears would drop! Everybody's ears would drop! Malays don't. You only get that in the movies. I mean I suppose that's why Malay movies fail.

R: I see, so Malays don't express their love?

Shareen: No. You don't say it. Well, if it's in the daily deeds, yes. I mean if I ask my husband "Do you love me?" He'd say, "Saya balik ke rumah tiap tiap hari, I duduk dengan you, I ta pergi mana mana. (Translation from Malay to English: I come home everyday, I live with you, I don't go anywhere else). I eat your meals, you're the mother of my children, what more do you want? I spend my time with you. What more do you want me to say?" It does not have to be said. Something unspoken, something unmentioned.

Tina, the Iban student from Sarawak described how she preferred expressing herself in English in certain contexts because "it's straight to the point. Anger umm especially anger, happiness." Tina describes her discomfort in the expression of love in Iban:

T: It sounds weird, very weird. Because it tends to sound so mushy and then you don't like it.

R: But Ibans do have words for love, right?

T: Oh yeah but it sounds so fake, it sounds so fake. In Iban when you say "I love you", you say, "*Aku rindok ke nuan. Aku sayau ke nuan.*" It sounds so funny. It sounds really really funny.

R: But won't it sound more funny if you say it in a foreign language?

T: But it's straight to the point. See — "I love you!" Not to me, I find it easier to express myself in English other than using other languages.

Tina says that her native tongue inhibits her in the expression of certain ideas and feelings because of the syntax and the indirect nature of the Iban language:

And it is not really expressive, is it? Yeah you can't really express yourself as an Iban. You will lose all the time for that. Long sentences and you waste time arranging the words. If you use English language, you go straight to the point.

Because of some of the characteristics of local cultures within Malaysia, for example indirectness and non-confrontation, acquisition of the English language allows the subjects another channel — to transcend the identity of that particular culture and switch to another language and concomitantly another identity which allows for more direct expression of feelings.

Other areas of expression in which subjects reported a preference for using English because of its more direct nature over their mother tongues are in the expression of anger. Rosie states that when she is angry, she swears in English. She finds it far too crude to swear in Malay,

I swear a lot in English. It feels so crude to swear in Bahasa Malaysia (the Malay language, also referred to as BM). In English you can just say 'Shit.' In BM it sounds very harsh.

Shareen shares that the Malay language does not lend itself to expressions of anger as the Malay culture has strong features of indirectness and non-confrontation in social interaction:

S: I don't know because there's so much indirectness in the Malay culture. You don't say it directly, things are said indirectly. For example if you want to say something, you don't go straight and say "I cannot come to your class tomorrow." You would say, "Actually I have something on tomorrow you know, and I've got to take my daughter you know for her hepatitis injection or something."

R: How about expressions of anger?

S : I don't know. I still feel it's done indirectly you know you don't scold the person directly. It's so crass or uncouth to scold the person directly so you sort of *sindir* (Malay word for 'to hint') like even in the Malay language you have this *marah anak sindir menantu* (Malay proverb meaning 'Scold your child to hint to your in-law').

Thus when using a second language, the culture of the first language permeates resulting in complex identity dynamics in which the speaker has to be aware of the multiple layers of identity and adapt to the situation. Shareen talks about this in her interview:

S: Some things just go unsaid, so you don't say it so some kind of er you suppress something in you. Because I find that if you scold somebody in Malay it sounds very vulgar. You can't scold somebody in Malay. It's not the language so much, it is the culture. You don't go to people and say something like this, especially to those people who are not familiar with these other values from the west.

R: Are you saying you do not internalize the value systems with the English language? You're just using the language?

S: Umm. You sort of have to adapt, you use the English language but not everything you want to say can be said. Because um and you can't say it to all the people you want to say it with. But to someone maybe a Malaysian to another let's say a Malay who speaks English, can do it but it has got to be very gentle.

Tina, the Iban subject, feels that the direct quality of the English language helps in decision-making. She says that in Iban culture, you tend to keep things inside for a long time before making a decision but she finds that the straightforward nature of English helps to clarify her thoughts in the decision-making process:

Decision making — you tend to be straightforward and direct. Because normally, if you are a pure Iban, you tend to keep it yea if you have dissatisfaction in you, if you don't like something, you keep it until it kills you, you see. Yea, I would say that the influence is that I don't have that thing in me. Once I don't like something I just point it out. It's influenced by my English, direct.

Rosie, a Malay subject, says that there are topics which she feels more comfortable talking about in English. She finds it difficult to talk about certain subjects in the Malay language particularly when she is mixing with friends who speak in Malay. In her personal narrative, Rosie writes that, "I often take Malay as a very polite language as there are for example taboo items that are forbidden to be discussed" (personal narrative). Rosie states:

Rosie: It retards you you know somehow when your Malay friends tell you, "Don't speak in English." It retards me in the sense that there are things that I feel so easy to talk about when I say it in English. And BM (abbreviation for *Bahasa Melayu*) somehow puts things in a very orderly manner. BM is very gentle, a language that puts, you know, like your friends first, you have to put things in a very proper manner.

R: What topics do you feel more comfortable speaking in English?

Rosie: Topics such as feelings, perhaps. Taboo items like sex for example. Malays don't really talk about that. When you say it in English — I've never had sex before but I talk about sex but it's forbidden. But in English when you talk about sex, it's a very open topic, you know. You can say anything on that. But my friends they have this attitude, that of "Do you talk about sex?" They look at you as if you've had sex before, you are actually adopting the Westerners' opinions about use of sex. In Malay it's too strong. Yet they don't want you to talk in English.

Rosie's point here reflects the intricate relationship between language and culture. When a culture does not openly encourage the discussion of certain topics as it is considered improper or too crude or vulgar, the language too reflects this mindset and does not lend itself to discussion of such topics. By having a second language, English, which offers a greater quality of directness and neutrality, the subjects in this study reveal that they conduct complex identity switches, transcending their own cultural borders to express themselves or to talk about topics which interest them.

Discussion

My interpretation of this theme is that when the subjects prefer to use the English language and not their native language to express intense emotions, uncomfortable situations or discuss controversial topics, it is because the culture is operating within the particular situation. As Trueba (1993) puts it, language and culture are inseparable and one cannot be acquired without the other. They are "two interlocked symbols" (Trueba, 1993, p.26) which are considered essential for human interaction. Apart from its communicative function, a language also has a symbolic function. Language is a tool for communication as well as serves as an emblem of groupness, as a symbol and a rallying point (Edwards, 1985). Therefore with every language, there is a particular world view of a culture attached to it. Language and culture are so inextricably interwoven, that when using a particular language one operates within that cultural world view as well. Thus in the articulation or expression of certain emotions which do not feel right or appropriate in their native culture, the subjects of this study, who are bilingual/bicultural or multilingual/multicultural speakers, resort to identity switches and opt for another language to express themselves without feeling that they have transgressed certain rules of appropriacy from within their culture.

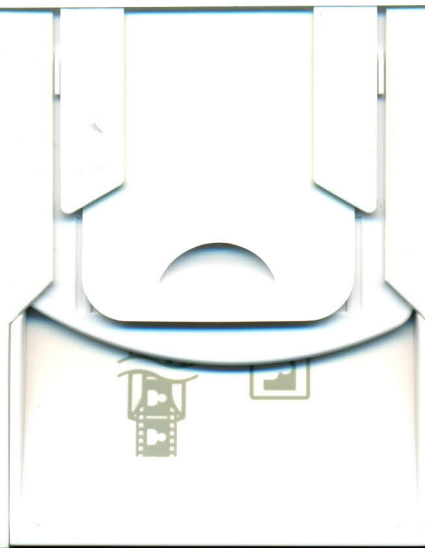
Some salient characteristics of the Malay culture are indirectness and a preference for avoidance of open confrontation over issues. Even when one is angry with another person, words are seldom spoken harshly or angrily and it is considered "crass or uncouth" in Shareen's words to scold a person directly. The language therefore reflects this cultural stance and having a choice of another language gives the person a way to switch out of his cultural identity and adopt what she perceives as a more neutral identity and neutral language to vent her anger.

Tina, the Iban student, shared a similar view. When expressing strong emotions, Tina stated that the syntax and the indirect nature of the Iban language made it difficult for her to express herself, so she preferred to make an identity switch. In switching to English which she argued is more precise, a change in identity takes place as well and she does not feel it incumbent upon herself to continue thinking in indirect and oblique ways, but to act assertively as empowered by the language to do so. Rosie shared that she found it difficult to talk about certain issues such as sex in her mother tongue. This discomfort, however, does not take place when operating on taboo topics in English.

Hence, a language choice determines a certain identity and a cultural stance to operate in. When taking on multiple identities, subtle shifts in persona take place. Languages, therefore, are best seen as different systems reflecting different varieties of the human condition. "Although they may be unequal in complexity at given points, this does not imply that some have, overall, greater expressive power" (Edwards, 1985, p.19). No language is superior to another and as environments differ, the things that must be detailed in language differ (Edwards, 1985). It is cultures that differ, with different emphases and differing world views and this is reflected in the language.

Theme 2 - Reflective and Decentering Quality of English

The findings revealed that acquisition and mastery of the English language impacted the identities of the participants not just in interactive ways but also in a non-interactive capacity. A dominant theme that emerged was that a knowledge of English brings along with it an exposure to alternative views and ideas, and facilitates a more reflective and critical attitude towards one's own culture. Knowing the English language allows the subjects a decentering from one's own culture or from just one cultural viewpoint. Peggy a Chinese participant felt that English has broadened her mind, and provided her with a less ethnocentric view of life. She says, "you become more open-minded, more receptive to other cultures, for example, Western concepts."



She feels that it was through her readings in English language that she was exposed to views that she may otherwise not have heard of. Peggy reports that the English language: allows you to come into contact with all these different issues which are not mentioned much in Chinese. Because if you follow Confucianism and all that, there's no such thing as women and men being equal and all that. So maybe reading and speaking in the language allows you access to different kinds of concepts which are not Chinese, not Asian, like feminism especially gender equality.

Peggy feels that her knowledge of the English language empowers her in the sense that it liberates her from having to conform to any culture, helps her to transcend culture-bound behavior and therefore speech, by providing a recourse to switch to an alternate and more "ethnically neutral" identity.

Queenie, who is a Hakka Chinese, says that language shapes one's thinking because of the knowledge one has acquired in that particular language. Leng, another Chinese participant, stresses that everything she knows about her Chinese heritage has been through another language, and she finds this an advantage. She feels that she is richer for it because it helps her to avoid being too ethnocentric:

When I read Chinese philosophy, I am not the Chinese-educated, speak-in-Chineseness Chinese approaching this. I am approaching this through the English, you know, or German translations. Everything that is Chinese for me has been filtered in another language. It gives me a perspective which I definitely will not have if I got it from the inside out. There is definitely a limitation to being umm an ethnically marooned person. I'm so sorry but I am the whole of what I am.

You see what I mean or or okay, the figure of islands and that's the mainland right but I have left the mainland. I have lived on this island, and now when I go back to this mainland I get a a new vision I see a different perspective and I think I am I am umm richer for for it.

Of the Malay participants, Shareen states that knowing English as a second language allows her to make comparisons and to reflect on her own culture. She says:

Um I suppose the language have actually affected my personality in a way that umm being direct indirect things like that you know you sort of know er you understand. Because I know English, I can see that Malays are indirect, ways of saying things. I can compare, I can make comparisons.

Shareen feels that knowing English gives her an ability to see things from different points of view:

R: Has English shaped you? Shaped your thinking or influenced your personality?

Shareen: In a way, yes, I think so.

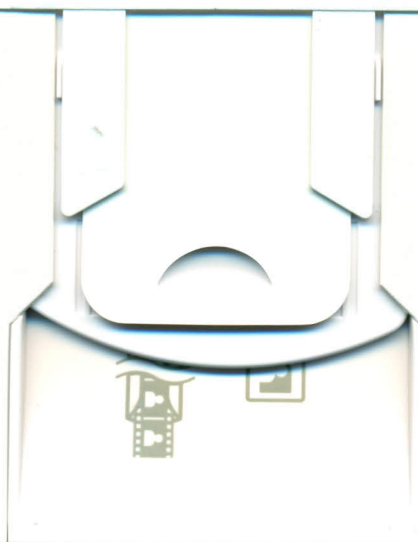
R: Would you be different if you hadn't learnt English?

Shareen: Ya, I'm sure.

R: How?

Shareen: I sort of can see things. Because when I think of marriage, you know, like when I was young I was told many times er you've got to marry an Arab and this and that but umm when I look at things I mean being able to speak English and read in English you know you get to know a lot more, right, there is greater access to knowledge and you start seeing things from different points of view.

Fazira shares that knowing English has made her more liberal and accepting and exposed her to issues such as feminism, pro-abortion and other issues which she may not have been aware of had she been literate in only one language, i.e. Malay.



Fazira's comment here raises an interesting issue that literacy is, to an extent, determined by the language/s one acquires literacy in. Knowing a second language allows one to transcend the cultural borders of one's own language group and access the views and ideas of another culture. In the case of English, an international lingua franca, the subjects reported that they could access the viewpoints and world views of far more than just the native speakers of English. Through their readings in English, they are able to view life not just through one moral and cultural prism but to view and reflect on life through many more dimensions and cultural perspectives.

Discussion

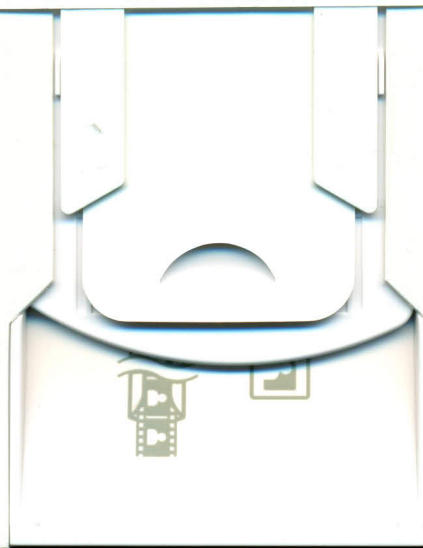
In a multicultural context then, the cultural framing of literacy becomes more obvious. Literacy does not simply consist of a universally defined set of skills constant across time and space. As cultures differ in what they consider to be their 'texts' and in the values attached to these 'texts', they will also differ in what they consider as literate behavior. In a culturally heterogeneous society, literacy ceases to be a characteristic inherent solely in the individual, but an interactive process constantly being redefined and renegotiated as the individual transacts with the socioculturally fluid surroundings (Ferdman, 1990). Therefore, the subjects of this study, as they interact with different cultural 'texts' and differing world views, report that they enjoy a sense of empowerment and a sense of freedom as they cross cultural borders mentally, think about issues through different cultural lens, and make their own choices in their own lives.

An interesting finding was that literacy depends on what language one knows and hence what world view(s) one has been exposed to. The findings sensitize us to the fact that one's world view depends on the language through which knowledge was acquired and therefore the moral/religious/cultural stance one has been exposed to. Becoming intercultural or multicultural is seen as a process of reaching beyond culture for "full blossoming of our uniquely human adaptive capacity" (Kim & Ruben, 1988, p.315). Identity thus helps in making an individual more flexible psychologically in changing and diverse environments. When it comes to learning new knowledge and experiences, human beings have an enormous adaptive capacity for growth and adaptation. Identity becomes increasingly flexible. Fitzgerald (1993) states that, "Identity, after all, is uniquely human — potentially adaptive and transformative for those who accept the challenges of growing beyond previous expectations" (p.188).

Theme 3 – Identity Conflicts

A third significant theme that emerged was that many of the subjects talked about identity conflicts within themselves. Of the three Chinese participants, Peggy expresses a deep yearning to be more acquainted with her Chinese heritage. Leng adopts a sense of detachment and does not feel impassioned about her cultural identity as she is "already displaced" she says, as a Straits Chinese. Queenie is confident and self-assured and employs resistance and avoidance strategies of a group of students of campus who marginalize her because she does not seem "Chinese" and cannot speak Mandarin.

Of the two Indian participants, Sita expresses deep concern that while she feels strongly rooted in her cultural identity, she is fearful that her daughter might never understand the depth and beauty of her heritage because she cannot access it as her daughter is not proficient in Tamil. Maria expresses a yearning for a greater understanding of her cultural heritage and a sense of regret that she is not able to access her own culture through her native tongue, Tamil.



The Malay participants, on the other hand, do not have a language loss or language attrition problem as they are all proficient in Malay. Their identity conflicts stemmed more from the conflicts and tussles between different value systems. Fazira describes a feeling of being "trapped" sometimes. Mariam describes herself as being "bits and parts of being here and there." Zuriah reported that when she returned to Malaysia, after six years of studies in England, she felt "so trapped." She was not openly rebellious but resentful that so many expectations were imposed on her as to how to behave but eventually, chose "the path of least resistance" and conformed more with what was expected of her in Malay society.

Shareen describes herself as "someone who is drowned in between." She talks about a "Jekyll and Hyde feeling" as she has to constantly switch identities and deal with conflicts between her more abstract direct self and operate in contexts within society which operate more on the other polarity requiring indirectness and conformity.

Fazira talks about her sense of displacement and how she feels torn between conflicting sets of values. She feels a sense of urgency that she ought to be more Malay as she is planning to get married to her boyfriend whom she says is from a "very Malay background" and whose family is "very religious":

The culture here wants us to be good, huh, to be, what do you call it? Virtuous (laughs nervously). I I feel quite trapped when I see what my friends are going through, you know. I felt trapped.

Fazira says that she hopes to resolve these conflicts by learning more about what is expected of her and to make changes if necessary:

Now that I'm planning to get married so I'm I'm trying to get into the Malay group and learn stuff that I have been avoiding when I was growing up. I need to know too where I came from. I want to have a family, a responsibility that comes along with it.

But the inner tensions are obvious as Fazira rebels against certain assumptions within her culture. When asked whether she feels pressure to conform, she says that she questions the role that women have to play in her society.

I don't understand why Malay women have to behave in a certain way because Malay women are supposed to be nice, obedient, the givers. I don't know, just that I feel that women, not all women are like that.

Mariam another Malay subject, is a non-conformist. For her, fluency in English is a symbol of her emancipation and a tool of agency. But with it comes a price for she has internalized this non-conformity quality in her and finds it hard to accept everything within her own culture as well. She states that the English language in her has given her agency to be courageous enough not to blindly conform: She sums up this impact of the English language on her identity:

Mariam: It has given me Agency. Agency. Ability to act. I'm not dependent on others. I have the language in me, because of that I create a gateway for me to be able to assert my own identity without having to conform. Or else I have to conform because I don't have the tools.

Mariam states that she has changed and describes herself as "transitional Malay". She has moved from "the old conformist traditional thing" and states that she "cannot go back there anymore." Mariam was embittered by experiences of racism as a schoolgirl in England and made it an objective to master the English language "to show them". In doing so, she has been empowered in the process but has also imbibed many of the abstract values which the language has exposed her to. Mariam is a non-conformist in a culture that is largely con-

formist in nature. She feels that the English language has given her agency to act and allowed her to dare to be different. She describes herself as "bits and parts of here and there" and that her identity is in a constant state of flux. However, as she grows older, she longs to go back to her roots yet she wants to retain her sense of autonomy and independence. As quoted earlier, Mariam states, "Maybe as I grow towards old age, I might change. Depends on events, something can happen. Right now, I'm in the abstract but longing to go to back to the concrete."

Discussion

The findings revealed that the subjects found acquisition of the English language an empowering learning experience. They state that in a multicultural society, where certain values are attached to the use of the native languages, resorting to English gives them a freedom of expression because of its neutrality as it is 'free of any ethnicity' within the localized contexts. Some subjects state that even if the language is culture-bound, one is able to make choices and does not have to accept what may be unacceptable in our local cultures. The data shows that the English language impacts the identities of the subjects in complex and subtle ways. The fact that the subjects feel that the language has so empowered them and liberated them from one view of thinking, from ethnocentric perspectives and broadened their minds attests to the fact that it is not totally neutral. Non-neutrality may not always have to be viewed in a negative light as it can contain positive benefits as well. Even if the subjects feel that the language is neutral, it is clear that the sociocultural context in which the English language is acquired or learnt is not, but is imbued with complexities and ethnic, social, cultural and political issues.

Conclusion

Thus the findings of this study show that learning English is not a straightforward simple process but loaded with complexities and fraught with perils. While all the subjects shared that the acquisition of English is an empowering experience, it is important for us to be aware that the teaching and learning of English is far more complicated and involves complex issues beyond effective teaching techniques, materials and teaching and learning processes.

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